

Someone was shaking his shoulder. From the delicate, long, gloved fingers, it could only be Wes.

Wilson rolled over with a sleepy, slurry moan. "What... what is it?"

Wes patted his cheek. Wes wasn't big on personal space.

Wilson sat up. "Is something attacking?"

Wes had stuck his head and shoulders into the tent. He looked alarmed, and made frantic beckoning motions. Wilson's heart squeezed against his ribs. "Is it Wendy?"

Wes just beckoned to him again. He himself looked to be in perfect health.

"You're blocking the way!"

Wes moved aside. Wilson crawled out of the tent, gasping slightly in the cold air. His quick breaths made little panic-puffs in front of his face. Winter was coming on fast, and he couldn't even keep everyone alive and healthy in autumn!

He didn't see any monsters about, or hear the baying of hounds. Was it too late? Had they done their damage and left? Or perhaps the emergency wasn't monster-related.

Wes grabbed Wilson's hand and tugged him to the crock pot. Once there, Wes began to make a pathetic display, indicating the mouth and stomach...

Wendy was sitting right there by the fire, obviously in no danger. She looked placidly up at Wilson. "Good morning..."

Wilson blinked at her. "Good morning..."

Wes pointed to the crock pot and looked at Wilson with pleading eyes full of pathos. He seemed so much calmer now...

Wilson squinted at him. "My friend," he said. "I sure hope you didn't wake me at the crack of dawn because you wanted me to cook you breakfast."

Wes looked at him calmly.

Wilson looked back at Wendy. He took in the image of her sitting there, uninjured, and tried to use it to replace the mental image he'd formed of her lying dismembered on the ground.

He looked back at Wes, who had a waggish sparkle in his eyes.

"Maybe I'll shove you in that pot with some eggs and eat you for breakfast," said Wilson. There were crispy sleep-crumbs in the corners of his eyes. He rubbed them away with a huff.

Wes clasped his hands by his chest and sank to one knee. He jerked his head pointedly in the direction of the crock pot.

"Mmh." Wilson wiped the sleep-crumbs off onto his pants. A slight ache hummed in the back of his head. "Do you understand that an intellectual needs eight hours or more of uninterrupted sleep to function?..."

He'd been up in the middle of the night talking Wolfgang down from a nightmare, too. He'd been counting on having a chance to sleep past dawn. Urgh.

Wes did not look particularly sympathetic.

"Where is Wolfgang?" Wilson asked. His snores- usually as strong as the rest of him- were not emanating from his tent.

Wes shrugged and pointed vaguely towards the horizon.

"He's gone out?" Wilson asked. There was nothing particularly suspicious in this, Wolfgang seemed to like to go out early and do chores or exercise his muscles.

Wes nodded.

There was a panicky voice in the back of his head that insisted Wolfgang could meet a horrible fate on his morning walk, but the fellow was in peak physical condition and hovering over him like a mother hen would be ridiculous. Without having evidence to the contrary, Wilson would assume he was fine.

He made a doomed attempt to neaten his hair, which was in an awful state of disarray from having just been slept on. He glanced at the brightening sky. Even if Wes let him return to his tent, he wasn't going to get much more sleep. It was getting too bright outside, and there was still some adrenaline left in his system from when he'd thought Wendy had been violently killed or was in the process of being violently killed.

Wilson turned to Wendy. "Are you hungry too?" he asked, yawning partway through and trying to talk through the yawn.

"What's 'haugngray'?"

"D'you want breakfast?"

"Want?" She considered this. She was fiddling with the flower she claimed to be her sister. The flower's aura was getting more and more unsettling by the day. He was going to have to have a talk with her about that thing soon. "I suppose if your goal is to prolong my life," she said, "you should give me something to eat..."

"I'll make you and Wes some breakfast," he mumbled, opening the newly constructed ice box, next to the newly constructed second crock pot- everyone had been climbing all over each other to get to the single pot yesterday. Wes had been mysteriously able to cook for himself then...

Wait a second. "Wes," said Wilson. "There is no food in this ice box..."

Wes nodded, raising his eyebrows.

"Why didn't you say so to begin with?!"

Wes looked scoldingly at him, and began to do the 'invisible wall' thing with his hands, presumably as a reminder that he was a mime.

"He cannot," said Wendy. "Wes is silent as the grave, forever..."

"I know that! It's a figure of speech, which I used to mean 'why didn't you just show me the empty ice box instead of pointing at the crock pot?'" Wilson shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was just going to waste time and raise his blood pressure by arguing, when what he needed to do was get food for two hungry people. Oh, yeah, and he should eat too. Make that three. "I don't suppose Wolfgang has gone out because he's hunting?"

Wes nodded and made a thumbs-up gesture. Then Wolfgang would be getting his own food, so he was taken care of, at least.

Wilson looked about the camp, exhaling slowly through his nose. The place was looking quite nice, after three days of four people working instead of just one. Construction was progressing four times as quick as it did with one Wilson. Wolfgang and his muscles could do the work of two Wilsons, and Wendy and Wes were each worth about half of one. Two plus two halves plus the original evened out to four.

Wolfgang also ate as much as two Wilsons. And Wes also ate as much as two Wilsons. Wendy was somehow able to consume as much food as a grown man. That was four people doing the work of four people and consuming the food of six people.

"Did he go west, to the beefalo?" Wilson asked.

Wes nodded. He leaned up against the science machine and began to languidly smoke an imaginary cigarette.

"Then I shall go east to the meadows," Wilson decided. "Wendy, why don't you come and help me gather?"

"Must I?" she asked.

"We're completely out of food and many hands make light work. You like having food to eat, don't you?" He wasn't sure how much he trusted Wes as a baby-sitter and would much rather Wendy came with him.

"I suppose."

"Berry-picking isn't so bad," said Wilson. "You may even enjoy it, once the weather warms up a little." It should stop being so bone-chilling out once the sun was a bit higher.

"Do you enjoy it?" she asked.

"No, not really. I did say that you may enjoy it, not that you definitely would. We'll see you shortly, Wes..." He beckoned to Wendy, and with a small sigh, she followed him out of camp.

///

There was a path that led to the meadow, a packed-down dirt path. "Do you ever wonder where these paths come from?" Wilson asked.

"Wondering is your job, not mine."

A child, being an unformed human thing with a growing mind, ought also to have curiosity as part of the job description. Perhaps poor Wendy was too worn down by this world to have her sense of wonderment intact.

Treating her nicely and giving her space ought to let her heal. "Maybe they're animal trails," he said. "It's the cobblestone roads that are really confusing. Those must have been built."

"Mm. They all lead to nowhere, you know."

"Do they?... that depends on your definition of 'nowhere', I suppose... this one leads to the berry meadow!"

"A fascinating place..."

Wilson swallowed and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. As she often did, she looked preoccupied with her own thoughts.

The flower was clutched in her hand.

"Wendy... that flower..." he said.

"Abigail will be here soon."

"I-" He stopped as a realization came to him. "Will be here?..." He'd misunderstood all along! Abigail was not the flower. Abigail was the aura. "What manner of being is Abigail?"

"My twin sister."

He eyed the flower. Could there be something at work upon it that would summon a flesh and blood girl from another place? Wendy's own aura was somewhat dark, to be honest, so it wasn't impossible for that to be another of her in there, he supposed. Not impossible. Now that he knew there was more at work than a cursed flower, though, he was less confident that he should ask Wendy to give it up. He'd have to think about this.

Wendy tucked the flower away. "You like to ask questions."

"It's one way to learn things."

"Why do you care to learn things?"

Who wouldn't want to learn things?! He was so dumbfounded by the idea of not wanting to learn things that he could think of no reply.

They'd arrived at their destination now anyway so it was time to stop talking and start doing.

There was a pond near these berry bushes, and a monster frog was lazily hopping around. "Maybe you'd better stay back while I take care of that," Wilson said.

Wendy stood in place eyeing the frog while Wilson walked up to it. These darn things were fast and hard to dodge, so he was sporting some lovely bruises on his shins by the time he'd splintered its skull, but even so the whole thing was over fairly quickly.

He looked over at Wendy. She must have found that rather violent, unsettling, even. "Sorry you had to see that."



Her face showed no emotion. "Yes... such carnage..."

He cleared his throat and put the frog away in his backpack for butchering back at camp. "Let's pick those berries..."

"There are none to be picked."

"What?" His head snapped up. The bushes by the pond were bare. "But I didn't do that! And I know none of you did."

"A turkey?"

Wilson scowled. "Maxwell." His teeth clenched in anger; his stomach clenched in hunger.

"Maxwell is a turkey?..." Wendy said dryly.

"He is, actually. And he's a thief like one. Come on, Wendy, there have to be more nearby- he's too lazy to have picked 'em all. And there are carrots here. Fortunately, he's not fond of vegetables. Unfortunately, neither am I. But they prevent us from getting scurvy, I guess." He knelt and began to loosen one of the orange roots from the earth.

"You seem quite certain that this was Maxwell's doing," Wendy said, as she padded about the meadow looking for more bushes.

"Who else?!" Granted, Maxwell did also need food to survive. Given his poor survival skills, berries were likely the best he could manage for himself. He was picking them so that he could eat them-not to spite Wilson. There was no reason to feel angry or offended by this. Yet, he did feel angry. And offended. The heart did not always listen to the mind.

Of course, if Maxwell hadn't run off like a coward to survive on his own they could have shared the berries. That might be worth feeling slighted over. Running from Wolfgang, Wes, and Wendy, of all people! Who would fear them? Sure, Wolfgang looked imposing, but he was a big ol' teddy bear and the jerk who'd kidnapped him to this place ought to know that.

He shook his head with a scowl and kept picking carrots.

///

Back at camp, Wolfgang had returned from hunting- he and Wes were sitting by the fire pit, Wolfgang speaking to the mime in a foreign tongue. But... something was horribly wrong!

Wilson stopped dead and nearly dropped his armful of food.

"Wolfgang! What happened?"

Wolfgang's muscles had deflated. He was a stick figure, a gaunt, sad, small man, smaller than Wes. This was not possible. He'd been fine just a few hours ago! But it had to be him- the moustache was right. Those were Wolfgang's clothes... though they sagged on his frame. It felt like Wolfgang. It was just. Wrong.

"Are you sick?" he asked. "Let us help you!" It occurred to him that maybe the fault was in his own eyes or perceptions. He almost hoped it was! Wilson glanced around to see if the others were seeing this too- Wes looked sympathetic, Wendy looked slightly surprised. They were seeing something, but if it was as drastic as what Wilson saw, he didn't know.

"I need foods," Wolfgang said sadly. "Is cooking." He got up and checked the crock pot. "Aha!" He dug some huge quarters of meat out of the pot and scarfed them down. Immediately, literally within ten seconds or less, the massive muscles had regrown, and The World's Strongest Man stood flexing by the ice box-

"Stars and atoms," said Wilson, again coming close to dropping what he held- he really should put this stuff down. "Does that happen often, Wolfgang?!" He glanced again at the other's faces. Wendy looked astonished.

"Meats make me strong!" Wolfgang explained. "No meats, not strong!" He sounded as if he thought this was quite simple and obvious.

"That's really something." A light gray fog descended. Wilson shook his head to clear it, and his balance bobbed. He took a deep breath. "You know, I think I could use something to eat myself."

Wes took some food out of the other pot and retreated with it. Wilson prepared brunch for himself and Wendy and started it cooking, then put away the rest of the berries and carrots in the fridge- along with the frog carcass. There was already an impressive amount of meat packed in there. "Thanks for hunting," he said. He closed the ice box and sat down by the fire pit.

Wolfgang smiled. "Is welcome!"

Wilson drummed his fingers against the top of his thigh. "You lose your strength when hungry? That quickly?"

"Yes, need foods to be strong."

"Hm. It doesn't quite work that way for me," Wilson mumbled. He glanced at Wendy to see what she thought of all this. She was studying Wolfgang and stroking the petals of the Abigail flower, and he couldn't tell what she thought of all this in the slightest. Wes looked as if he thought everything was perfectly normal.

"Science man has no muscles," Wolfgang observed.

"Well, I have to have a muscular system or else I wouldn't be able to move at all, or breathe at all. But I don't think that's what you meant..."

"Tiny man brain instead is not good without foods, maybe? Is brain that is not mighty?"

Wilson considered this for a moment.

"I don't become an imbecile when I'm hungry, Wolfgang." But perhaps if he continued to press the subject that Wolfgang's physiology was not normal, he would make the poor man feel like a freak. He had to know more about this but... later. Gently... "Well- anyway, I'm glad you feel better!"

Wolfgang nodded. "I am glad also!"

"We have plenty of food now, so it shouldn't be a problem again for a while. What else do we need right now?..."

The other three looked at him expectantly. It hadn't been meant as a rhetorical question, but, er, alright.

Winter was coming, and soon. "Warm clothing for four people."

Wilson got up and checked the contents of camp storage.

Wolfgang had also brought back a great deal of warm, smelly beefalo wool. "Plenty of fur. Thank you again, Wolfgang..."

"I skinned many hair-cow!"

"Yes... now we just need silk..." He put his hands on his hips, tapping his foot and biting his lip. "A lot of silk. And we also need plenty of rocks for thermal stones."

"Wolfgang can punch scary spider. For new friends! Spiders live near rocks. Wolfgang also punch rock!"

"Right. We should all go. There's safety in numbers." He checked the cooking pots. His and Wendy's meals were ready. He gave her her food first and then tore into his own.

"We punch spiders together!" Wolfgang boomed.

Wilson pushed away the badly made wooden disk he used as a plate and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Yes, together!" A full stomach was an amazing morale-booster.

///

"Wolfgang, you've been out and about. Have you seen any signs of Maxwell?"

"No," said Wolfgang. "If I see, I will punch!"

"Good man." Wilson almost gave him an appreciative pat on the arm, but thought better of it. People didn't usually seem to like it when he touched them. He didn't want to bother Wolfgang. Instead he stayed on the subject of Maxwell. "I believe the old... thing is stealing our berries..."

Wes recoiled in mock horror.

Wilson paused to check his surroundings- he believed they would need to turn left soon to get to the spiders. Over there was a familiar clump of trees, and- what was that motion?

"Did you see that?" he whispered, pointing in the relevant direction.

"Calm thyself, thou vigilant bird-dog," said Wendy.

He shook his head at her. "I saw somebody over there," he said.

Wolfgang leaned forward and squinted. "Wolfgang sees nobody with his mighty eyes!"

Wilson glanced at Wes and Wes shook his head. Wilson looked back at the stand of trees. "Well," he said, "I don't see anyone anymore. I could've been wrong, I guess..." He rubbed his chin. It wasn't like him, though, to mistake random movements for people. Usually just for monsters. But now that there were other people here, perhaps something in his brain was having to adjust to the possibility existing of coming across a human form unexpectedly, and he was beginning to mistake movement for people when he hadn't before?

"It would be awfully coincidental for Maxwell to make an appearance just as we mentioned his name," said Wendy. "I suppose his kind do engineer such coincidences..."

"Here's the thing, though," said Wilson. "It didn't seem like Maxwell."

"Ah. Then you are seeing things, Wilson."

"I... could be. I'm just going to take a look, though." He went up to the clump of trees, looked about and found, of course, no sign of any humans passing by. There was a print in the dirt. It was a koala-elephant-thing footprint, very clear and distinct as if to gently chide him for mistaking the movements of a koala-elephant-thing for those of a human being, which was plainly what he had done. Even through the thick trees, the size difference should have been pretty obvious.

Wes touched his arm and pointed at the position of the sun in the sky. He held his arms crossed awkwardly in front of him to imitate the arms of a clock.

"You're right, we're burning daylight. Er, we take a left up here," Wilson mumbled.

///

"No, no no no, Wolfgang, don't literally punch the rocks!! Here, use a pickaxe. We have plenty of pickaxes! Wolfgang, no!"

Too late! The rock flew apart. Wilson ducked behind his arms to avoid losing an eye.

"Ha ha!" Wolfgang looked quite pleased with himself. "Rock is almost as easy to crunch as spider!"



And Wolfgang had crunched spiders. Indeed, he had crunched many. The ichor from their ruptured bodies stuck to the soles of Wilson's shoes as he marched up to Wolfgang and grabbed one of the meaty hands that had done so much killing, needing both of his own hands to turn over the massive slab of flesh and bone.

"Your knuckles are bleeding," he pronounced. Unfortunately, he didn't have the ash necessary to make a salve for it.

"Bah!" Wolfgang said.

"No BAH. You will use a PICKAXE." Wilson took the one he had been using and slapped it into Wolfgang's palm. He pressed the giant fingers around the handle. "You will use this."

"If makes tiny man not have head explode."

"It'll help."

Wilson turned away, shaking his head, as Wolfgang swung the pickaxe. Wes and Wendy were watching, Wes' eyes alight with amusement.

"Ah," said Wilson, clapping a hand on Wes' shoulder. "Don't worry, my friend. I have one for you, too!" He handed it over.

"And are you putting me to work as well, kind sir?" Wendy asked with a raise of her eyebrows.

"No," he said. "You sit and be a good girl. And don't play in the spider goo."

"I would not care to-"

"I saw you..." He turned to Wes. "You come with me. Wolfgang's going to obliterate that whole side and I doubt he'll notice if we happen to get in the way."

Wes looked at him beseechingly as Wilson pulled him away by the hand. Once they were in a good spot he let go.

"Now," Wilson said, "I know you must be tired. I certainly am." He had also killed a few spiders. Compared to Wolfgang, a ridiculously low number of them, but he had killed enough spiders that his shoulders ached slightly from the effort of bringing down the blows, and a few bites, scratches and bruises to his legs made them sore and slow. "However, we need these rocks to live! I need them to prepare salves to treat our wounds, we need them to make heat-retaining rocks to keep us alive through winter, and-" He turned his head. Wes was mining rocks with an invisible pickaxe, to no appreciable result.

Wilson walked up close to him. Wes turned his head.

"Hello."

Wes waved cheerfully. He made an exaggerated gesture of wiping sweat from his forehead.

Wilson looked from the hand still holding the invisible pickaxe to the undamaged rock. He threw up his hands. "I give up. Do what you want." He turned away. Maybe Wes, who did seem somewhat frail, was genuinely feeling incapable of doing the work. Maybe not. Wilson was too tired to get to the bottom of it, he'd just mine his own rocks so they could go home and he could sleep.

He split one boulder and then stopped to catch his breath. His arms were burning. If only he, too, sprouted bulging muscles after eating a beefalo steak...

In the quiet that remained when he stopped working, he heard the distinctive skittering footsteps of a nearby spider. Oh well wasn't that fantastic, they'd missed one. He turned to look for the source of the sound.

Nearby, Wes was wandering around pretending to pick invisible flowers. A warrior spider was creeping up behind the cheerfully oblivious mime. It was hunting. It was going to pounce, and Wes wasn't wearing any kind of armor!

The tip of Wilson's pickaxe hammered down between the warrior's main pair of eyes. It wrenched away and turned to him with the tool still stuck in its head, ichor dripping down. Wilson backed away and reached into his waistcoat for an axe.

The spider launched itself into his chest like a missile and knocked him onto the rocky ground on his back. He beat it with his fists, gasping for air.

He heard some sort of impact. The spider's body shook and it abruptly left him with a shriek. Wilson scrambled upright.

Wes was fighting the spider. Fighting in a nimble way that looked more like a dance than combat, darting in to lay a few light, lashing blows and then breaking free an instant before the fangs could touch him, confusing the monster into making only a short, dodgeable lunge and not springing forward.

Impressive! But he'd tire eventually and then unless something was done and quickly, it'd be good-bye Wes. Plus, any second that spider would remember it could jump. Wilson found that axe and rushed forward.

The spider didn't require much finishing off. Wilson fished the heal-gland out of its guts and then suddenly found himself looking into Wes' face, as Wes had grabbed him by the cheeks.

"What?"

Wes wrenched his head forward, pressing his cheek to Wilson's cheek and making an audible air-kissing sound with his lips- the first sound apart from breathing that Wilson had ever heard him make.

"What are you doing?" Wilson squeaked.

Wes pulled away, grabbing Wilson's hand and giving him a vigorous pumping handshake while clapping his back with painful enthusiasm.

"S- stop that!"

Wes let go, held up his empty hands with the palms out in a sort of apology gesture, and then clasped them under his chin with a big smile.

"If this is about the spider," Wilson said, still a touch out of breath- "you're welcome. And thank you for helping me finish him off..." He got to his feet, wiping his brow with his sleeve. He didn't see why Wes felt the need to be so demonstrative about this. Maybe he was being slightly sarcastic in his praise because Wilson had sort of botched that fight by letting the spider knock him over, or maybe he thought Wilson was so lazy or lacking in basic human decency that it was astounding for him to help somebody out with a spider.

He looked about. Wolfgang must have finished mining, because he was back at the rock Wendy sat on, talking to her and patting her little golden head. The daylight was beginning to dim as the sun sank in the sky, and it had been a long time since brunch.

"What if we just go back to camp?" he asked Wes.

Wes nodded, and they made their way back in Wolfgang's direction.

Wes caught Wilson's eye. Wilson noticed him faking an exaggerated limp.

"Are your feet sore?" he asked.

Wes pointed rather accusingly at Wilson.

"I don't understand." It wasn't Wilson's fault that they had to walk everywhere. If he ever came across a motorcar or even so much as a horse-drawn cart, Wes would be the first to know.

Wes rolled his eyes and shook his head. Wilson should really try to build a car, though. It was tiresome to walk everywhere. His legs ached.

Wolfgang was hoisting Wendy up onto his shoulder when Wilson and Wes approached him.

"Wolfg-" Wilson stumbled and fell onto his knees before he could finish.

He could sense the others turning to him in alarm, and his face turning warm as a result. "I'm fine!" The ground was uneven and he'd lost his balance, that was all.

His legs were stiff, and Wes had to haul him to his feet.

Wolfgang bent down to peer at him. "Tiny man has broken little stick legs?"

"Aah..." Wilson started to force a smile, but most people didn't find his smile terribly reassuring- he tried to look stoic instead. "I'm fine! My legs aren't broken, just, er..." He hadn't really sat down to examine what was wrong, but he knew it wasn't a fracture.

"Ha! Little eggy man is trying to do work of mighty Wolfgang. Is tiny legs snap like toothpick. I will help you!" Wolfgang swooped him up and plopped him on the other shoulder, sitting opposite from Wendy.

Wilson had never been up so high in this world before! He could see the entire rock plains from up here!

"Uh," he said, clearing his throat. "You don't have to carry me."

"Is little weight like feather to strong shoulders of Mighty Wolfgang."

Wilson gazed off to the horizon. The desert was that way, and he saw the distant form of something very large hovering in the air.

Wilson made a mental note not to go in that direction, ever.

Near the beast, he saw hounds swarming like ants around their mounds of bone. To the north, the sea glittered. To the west, a massive forest. To his slightly myopic eyes, all of these distant things had a faint haze over them, blotting out the less pleasant details of blood and death. He also couldn't smell anything but Wolfgang from where he sat. No manure or rotting flesh. One could be tricked into thinking the Constant was rather scenic.

Say, what was that moving over there? It was definitely bipedal. Perhaps there was a pig village that way... looked too small to be a pig, though.

Wolfgang abruptly turned away in the direction of home and Wilson couldn't see the distant figure anymore. Not that he could have been able to make out details if he had. "We go home and eat meats!" Wolfgang announced. His voice sent vibrations through his shoulders and neck and into Wilson's legs.

Wes tugged at Wolfgang's unitard and looked pathetic.

"Ha! Little clown friend is tired too," said Wolfgang. He picked up Wes and plopped him astride the big bull-neck inbetween Wilson and Wendy. Wes' leg rested on top of Wilson's leg and the mime showed no inclination to remove it. Wilson looked away and sort of pretended he wasn't there.

Wolfgang strode into the woods, conveying the three as if they truly were little weights like feathers. Wilson ought never to let this become a habit- he didn't want to make Wolfgang feel he had to babysit. But privately, he could admit that he rather liked it.